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SUBJECT: FRIEND OF MALIKI AND MUQTADA DISCUSSES SADRIST-GOI
RECONCILIATION, IRAN

REF: 08 BAGHDAD 3722

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Sheikh Mohammed Reda al-Numani, a close contact of both Prime Minister Maliki and the Sadr family, spoke optimistically in his February 18 meeting with Senior Advisor Gordon Gray about efforts to mediate between the Prime Minister and Sadrists. Numani, a Maliki supporter, offered insights into the Prime Minister's strategies for developing a governing coalition and his plans for the future. He believes that Muqtada al-Sadr, with whom he claims to converse regularly, has significantly moderated his views toward the U.S. and the GOI in recent months. Numani, who spent many years in exile in Iran, said ex-Prime Minister Ibrahim Ja'afari can be used as a conduit for the U.S. to open increased diplomatic relations with Iran. End summary.

Who Numani Is

¶2. (C) A religious sheikh based in Wasit, Numani studied under Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr in the 1970s and was a friend of Muqtada's father, with whom he studied in al-Hawsa (reftel). He has known Muqtada since he was a child, and says that he maintains regular contact with him during his frequent visits to Iran. Numani has also developed a strong relationship with Nouri al-Maliki, whom he has known since the 1970s, and with whom the sheikh maintained contact during his years in exile. While philosophically a 'Sadrism' and not a member of any party, Numani considers himself a strong supporter of the Prime Minister and backed his State of Law list in the provincial elections. Also a supporter of the Security Agreement (SA), Numani helped organize a November 2008 rally in Kut to show support for the SA while it was being debated in parliament.

The Prime Minister and the Sadrists

¶3. (C) Meeting with Gray at the Wasit provincial SWAT commander's estate outside of Kut, Numani spoke at length of his role in facilitating reconciliation between the Prime Minister and the Sadrist movement. According to the sheikh, the Prime Minister asked him in December to accompany him during a planned visit to Iran to meet with Muqtada and discuss issues affecting both sides. Numani did not accompany, but said that the two spoke last month for four hours in Mashhad, and agreed to "coordinate on policy." While he did not explain exactly what this phrase means, Numani said that the two sides agreed to review cases of Sadrist detainees and work together to appoint key positions in provincial governments. He also said that the Prime Minister is looking to bring the Sadrist Trend back into the

United Islamic Alliance, and believed that the Sadrists' 30 seats would provide Maliki with significant protection in parliament.

On Muqtada

14. (C) Numani, who spent most of his 23 years in exile in Iran and has an Iranian wife, claims to speak with Muqtada regularly and to meet with him occasionally on his frequent visits to Iran. He said that he most recently returned from Iran last week. The sheikh believes that Muqtada's views toward the U.S. and the GOI have moderated significantly in recent months, adding that, through their discussions, he has been able "to bring (Muqtada) around to the impartial side." He views the effort announced by Muqtada to turn the Sadrism movement into a social services organization as a real initiative, but spoke in a way that recognized the difficulty of moving in that direction. He characterized Muqtada's long stay in Iran as "good for him and good for the U.S." in that it removed Muqtada from the violence associated with the Sadrists. This, in turn, helped defuse long-standing conflicts between Sadrists and both the U.S. and the GOI.

Iran

15. (C) Numani said that many Iranians have told him during his visits that the country's leaders are worried about the

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effects of Iraq's successful provincial elections in advance of Iran's elections in June. He said that the U.S. should engage Iran's top leadership directly, opining that Iran and Iraq are very similar in that both cultures are accustomed to having strong leaders and that communication with leadership through diplomatic back channels is not likely to be effective. Numani suggested that ex-Prime Minister Ja'afari, whom he knows personally, could be used as a conduit to help develop U.S. relations with top Iranian leadership.

The Prime Minister's Future

16. (C) As a religious sheikh who believes in a strong Iraqi state, Numani believes Maliki is the only plausible leader for Iraq at this stage and hopes that he will stay for eight years (two terms). The sheikh said, however, that the Prime Minister recently told him that he does not want to run for a second term and would like to step down. When pressed on whether he thought Maliki's friends and supporters would convince him to run again, Numani seemed to concede that this would probably be the case. The sheikh said that Maliki is driven by his goal of maintaining a unified Iraq. According to Numani, Maliki told him in a conversation last month that he does not want conflict with the Sunnis or ISCI, but would confront them if necessary. When asked about the Kurds, the Prime Minister said that the Kurds want their own country and, if necessary, he would arm and fight them himself to prevent this from happening.

17. (C) State of Law's victory was purely a Maliki victory, in Numani's view, and not a Da'wa victory. Beyond the normal arguments that voters appreciated Maliki for providing security and standing up to extremists, Numani pointed out the Prime Minister's simple lifestyle as a reason for his success. "Some members of parliament have ten houses spread over the world. Maliki doesn't even have a house. People know that he is not rich or getting rich."

The Security Agreement

18. (C) Numani reiterated his support for the Security Agreement, calling it America's greatest accomplishment in Iraq. In his view, the U.S. has succeeded in its military objectives in Iraq and is on the way to achieving its political objectives -- and the SA goes a long way to helping the U.S. consolidate the latter. He said that the SA enhances American credibility since Iraqis know that we will not leave immediately but that we will leave eventually.

Comment

19. (C) A friend of both Maliki and Muqtada, and a religious sheikh partial to chain smoking and long digressions on unusual topics, Numani is a true original. His influence with the Prime Minister is well documented; his current influence with Muqtada and other Sadrists is harder to corroborate, though his links to the Sadr family and movement are extensive. As the Prime Minister moves further toward reconciliation and political alliance with the Sadrists, Numani may play an essential role in facilitating dialogue. The relationship between Maliki and Muqtada is still fragile and the nascent Da'wa-Sadrism partnership not fully formed, so a trusted hand will be needed to help guide the process. End comment.
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